Lara was bored. November days in London weren't really her style — it had been too between adventures. In this first of seven episodes, ERICA WAGNER, the literary editor The Times, launches Lara on a perilous journey across three continents to greatest Egyptian mystery of them all-linitered on a

> Lara rounded the corner and - just as she'd suspected - _ nearly tripped on a book that had slipped out of a the thug was waiting for her. She felt the adrenaline not-exactly-orderly pile. Treasures of the Cairo rush up into the roots of her hair as he lungulather. Museum. -swearing, but she feinted, drawing from behind her the lead pipe she'd kept concealed. She swung it at ... She knelt. She'd forgotten she owned it. She leafed him with all her force, but he was fast, too, and managed to dodge away; in the blink of an eye she was staring down the barrel of a gun. Everything slowed: she could see his finger tighten on the trigger, and she heard the shot he fired, point blank, at her chest.

> Bloody hell," Lara grumbled, pushing her computer keyboard to the side of her desk. What rubbish these computer games were. Anyway, she had better things - The original copy of the letter no longer existed; the to do. In front of her was a mountain of papers, archivist had explained to her that once it had been books and files - she was sifting through them, trying set in type at would have been thrown away. It had Scott Had It Easy: An Antarctic Escapade? Barrelling through Borneo? Nothing seemed quite right. She got up and made herself a cup of coffee; looking out her kitchen window at the garden of the house stretched out below her. The leaves were just starting to turn; her beloved roses had closed and fallen, gone to sleep for another winter. This was always the time she wanted to get out of England, not sit at her desk.

Well, there might be one way...she picked up the letter she'd left lying on the table the day before. It had come - regular as clockwork, as it did every year from her godfather Jeremy, the man responsible for so many of her adventures. Each year he took her travelling, the price of her ticket always the same. She had to solve the puzzles he set, which revealed their starting point. It could be anywhere in the world and the test was always exacting.

Now the first of his puzzles lay before her; it wasn't hard for Lara to summon up the interest, but her concern about her next professional move still hung. London afternoons over her. She wasn't a girl any more, after all; and she had to earn a living - all this tomb-raiding was one ... She knew it-was cheeky-just showing up. thing but it wouldn't pay for the upkeep on this place. Luckily her uncle, She sighed and sipped her coffee, and heading back to her desk

through the pages, Jeremy's clue still in her mind; the conjunction of the two was serendipitous. As she gazed at stone and gold, at lapis and alabaster, it almost seemed to her that she could smell the dust and bustle of Egypt. She closed the book quickly. She'd had an idea.

to decide what the topic of her next book should be. appeared in The Times in March, 1923. "Death comes on wings to he who enters the tomb of a pharaoh," the novelist Marie Corelli reminded the paper's readers—avid for news of what would be revealed in the recently opened tomb of the boy-king. Tutankhamun. She claimed the admonition could be found in an ancient Arabic text in her possession; but all the same her warning might have gone unremarked had not Lord Carnaryon, patron of the tomb's discoverer. Howard Carter, died just a few days later. The Curse of the Pharaohs!

> What rot, Lara thought to herself as she looked carefully through the boxes the archivist had set in front of her. In 1922 The Times had paid £5,000 for exclusive coverage of the greatest. archaeological discovery of the century. News from the Valley of the Kings arrived 'by runner to Luxor" in those days; Lara sighed a little, wondering if life before e-mail and modems wouldn't have been rather more exciting. With its thick brick walls and small barred windows, the archive was quiet as a tomb on this rainy

who she hadn't seen in years, but never mind—had been up at Oxford with the Editor, reading classics. Shed met him a few times and thought he'd seemed all right. Sitting on a fat sofa in his low-lit, low-ceilinged office, she had a feeling he didn't know what to make of her. Still, he'd let her into the archive. Before she left she wandered over to his bookshelves and pulled off a volume of Xenophon in the original Greek which, she noted, had once belonged to "The Times Intelligence Service". Definitely, those were the days. She rattled off the opening paragraph for him; her Greek wasn't as rusty as she'd thought. That, at any rate, made him smile.

Death comes on wings to he who enters the tomb of a pharaoh. She sat with a pencil between her teeth, wondering where all of this was leading her. The archivist popped his head round the door. You all right in there?" She started.

"Yes, fine thanks," she said. "But is this all the material?" Somehow, curse or no curse, she hadn't found what she was looking for.

"I think so," he said. He seemed a nice enough fellow, Lara thought. He'd told her he was new on the job: been there six months. Lara couldn't have stuck it, shut up in dusty offices all the time. He counted the boxes in front of her. "Hang on." he said. He went into the back, and after a few minutes returned-with another, smaller than the others, made of wood, not cardboard. "Funny," he said. "I thought it might be part of that lot." There was a small label on the front, neatly written in black ink in an old-fastion ethand: 1923' was all it said. "I've not been although it might be one has, or not in a while, anyway."

He smalled at her. There you go, then." He left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Carefully. Lara opened the box, setting the lid on the table beside her. Inside was a mass of papers. unsorted, yellowing. All the other boxes had had their contents neatly divided into folders, tidily arranged. In truth, when she'd seen them her heart had sunk: she couldn't believe she'd find anything really new in such pristine order. But this... Carefully she began to siff through the material: much of the handwriting, she could now tell, was Howard Carter's: occasionally she saw the failing signature of Lord Carnaryon. Wostly it was accounts: there were columns of figures and names of photographers, journalists, news agencies. Among the papers she spotted something else hidden near the bottom of the box. It was a little handmade notebook. About three inches by four. made of thick heavy paper and bound with waxed twine, its cover was stained but unmarked. The first page was blank. On the next page some numbers: confused sums. Then a sketch or two: details, it looked like, of jewellery or statues. A Horus eye stared out at her. On the next page. Carter's writing again, this time cramped and hurried. She began to read:

They say this is the most important archaeological find ever to have been made in Egypt; perhaps anywhere in the world, and certainly I know that to be true. And yet I am still quite certain that there is more - of greater importance still, that is possible. And what I have found so far might well lead me on to the next. if I could only -

How's that?"

The archivist. Her heart was pounding. Slowly she closed the little notebook, it almost fitted into her palm.

"Fine, fine," she said quickly, trying not to sound out of breath. "It's, um, more of the same, you know... accounts, ledgers, that kind of thing."

"Not too exciting?" Lara smiled, unconvincingly, she was sure. "Not really." The archivist shrugged. "Well, you know where I am if you need me," he said.

When he'd gone, Lara hastily rearranged the papers from the box, piling them back in They'd never miss the notebook. Well, they wouldn't, would they? It had been sitting here all these years, not doing anyone any good - she was the one who should have it, she could do something with it. Grinning, she slipped it into the inside pocket of her leather jacket. She felt better than she had in months. \(\Psi\)

The next instalment of Down among the Dead will appear on Saturday December 4. The story will run until the New Year